



# EMERGENCE OF WORKER'S MOVEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA : ROOTED IN SOCIO-HISTORIC ANALYSIS OF PEASANT CONSCIOUSNESS

Deepika Chauhan

Assistant Professor (Sociology), Department of Sociology & Political Science, Dayalbagh Educational Institute (Deemed University), Agra, India.

## ABSTRACT

The paper aims to highlight the broad rubric of 'old' social movements' viz. Peasant struggle and resistance that ultimately led to mark a pivotal role in the emergence of Worker's Movements in Contemporary India. The author tries to focus upon the instantaneous micro-mobilisation and individual protests that occur as a consequence of resistance among social actors (workers) and human agencies (owners/contractors). The peasant resistance in its aggregate effects initiates the process of the erosion of unjust structures of power and domination. Whenever the social conditions of relative deprivation and denial exist, resistance and concealed non-compliance are bound to emerge. 'It is the existence of consciousness of injustice, deprivation and denial that moves the worker sections to resistance. A noteworthy fact is that studies on struggles of workers employed in the unorganized sectors are few and far between'. (Jaffrey 1981, Kannan 1988). They exhibit a lack of collective resistance mode through trade unions and strikes, for their social and economic rights. Moreover in this direction studies by Chandravarkar, Dipesh Chakrabarty deals with historical materialism which opens up new paradigms of understanding the 'working class' and their struggles. Hence the author tries to explore such paradigms to comprehend struggles of the contemporary working class of India in the era of globalization marked by the socio-historic analysis of peasant movements occur in the past.

**KEYWORDS:** class-consciousness, peasant consciousness, workers' movement, unorganized labour, class-struggle.

## INTRODUCTION:

The paper highlights the issues pertaining to labour and examines them in historical and sociological perspectives. It discusses the concept theories and socio-historical realities of emerging workers' movements in contemporary India whose roots are deepened in the peasant consciousness. The study focus on the nature of the grievances that throw up the workers' movements, the support base of the movements, the strategy that leaders adopt and the response of the authorities and the public masses and other related issues. The workers' movements are defined as such protests and rebellions done against the capitalists class (owners of production) by the worker class (proletariats), rebuking the oppression and injustices done to them. It occurs during the British colonial period in pre-independence India. On contrary, in contemporary India the 'modern' working class or the new working class arose in consequence to the development of factories and industries during the post nineteenth century. In the historical perspective of the emergence of the working class movements in India according to the labour historians, the span of working class activities is divided into four distinct phases: the first phase spans from 1850-1890, the second phase from 1890-1918, the third phase from 1918-1947 and finally the post-independence period. Here, a noteworthy contrast observation is being done in the nature of early and post-independence working class. Firstly, as far as early working class is concerned it was divided into organized and unorganized sections and this distinction lies even today. Secondly, there was an insufficient class demarcation between a peasant class and working class. As the labour historians claimed that for a given period of time in a year the worker migrated to his village and worked as a peasant. Thirdly, in the early years and to some extent even today the working class is segregated between class, caste, language, community etc. And lastly, today there is a major distinction between the workers employed in private sectors and those employed in public sectors. Generally, the workers employed in the public sector enjoy a better working condition than those employed in the private sector.

## Substantive factors culminating the Peasant-struggles and movements in India:

During British colonial period, the introduction of the exploitative Land Tenure system with Ryotwari and Zamindari system gave rise to the power of feudal lords and zamindars, thereby giving birth to the evolution of large body of leisure class living on the extortion of peasants in India. British systematically destroyed the indigenous class, cottage industries, transforming artisans into landless peasantry. The conditions of peasants in India during colonial period was miserable as being exploited by the landlords on one hand and by the expandable market introduced by the colonial leaders on the other hand. Rhetorically, peasant movement got momentum in different parts of the country in the form of Sanyasi Vidroh, Indigo movement, Champaran movement, Bardoli movement, Eka movement, Moplah Rebellion, Birsa munda movement etc. Later on, the year 1853 marked the emergence of modern industrial workers in India. At that time, the main components of the working class was landless, poor peasants and bonded agricultural labour-mostly belonged to socially backward and oppressed class: dalits and tribals. (Buxi, D.P)

All the leaders of early peasant movements got associated with Kisan Sabha that started in Bihar under the leadership of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati who had

formed in 1929 the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS) with the aim to mobilise peasant grievances against the Zamindari attacks on their occupancy rights. Kisan Sabha was a frontal organization for the peasant of the country to safeguard their interests and to protect them from extortion of landlords, moneylenders and exploitative colonial regime. Different classes of peasantry joining hands with each other driven by pro-poor socialistic ideology offered a momentum to this movement. A.R Desai states that the movement initiated by middle peasants subsequently received ideological support from middle class youth and finally this movement acquired a nationalistic appeal by which it got converted into mass movement. Peasant movements in Indian history were instrumental for India's independence. It is diversified in nature as demands for basic civil and economic rights, and articulates different concerns in time and space. Therefore, Indian peasant movement is unique, exclusive and hidden in character.

## Structural Typology and Objectives behind the Emergence of Workers' Movements:

D.D Kosambi and R.S Sharma together with Daniel Thorner brought peasants into the study of Indian history for the first time. The main objective of the workers movements in the present era is to concentrate the power and collective consciousness of the worker class. And there exists a powerfully organized Labour Movement and this vehemently occurs through the Trade Unionism in India that came into existence in 1918 at Madras by Mr. B.P Wadia. As there were no proletarian leaders at that time, and the Nationalist middle class politicians who took the lead utilized the strikes for demonstration purposes. To inquire about the labour unrest in India it was reported by GOI that in nine months, from July 1920 to March 1921, about 137 strikes took place in province of Bengal. Another incident of strike took place in Bombay states that in three months from April to June 1921, 33 strikes involving 240,000 workers with a loss of 500,000 working days occurred. In the same context of time, a strike of 20,000 workers occurred in the town of Madras. To suppress the labour movement in Madras, the government with the help of capitalists class tried to subdue the labourers. They imprisoned strikers, burnt their houses, fined the unions; but the labourers were very determined in their demands.

## Revolutionary Changes sought as a result of Peasant Movements driven by Class-Consciousness:

In the present era, due to the impact of the peasant movements occurred in the past times revolutionized the minds and actions of the people participating in the workers' movements. The changes driven by the sacrifices and struggles of the peasants paved a way to lead a better life for the workers of contemporary India. The major change that took place is in their class-consciousness, the realization of unionism promotes the spirits of liberty and protest against the injustices and suppression done to them. Also to secure the fair wages for workers (Madheswaran and Shanmugam, 2003) have analyzed the impact of trade unions on wages. Historically, union representation and collective bargaining have been the keys to the growth of a stable working population in developed economies such as, India are also able to improve working conditions and help workers gain job security. With the establishment of minimum wages, norms for mandatory work hours, provisions for health and safety and overall improvements in working conditions, unionization has become instrumental in improv-

ing the quality of life of workers (Ghosh & Geetika, 2009)

### 'Class-consciousness': a pivotal element in the Awakening of Workers'-Class Movement:

Neil Harding states that Plekhanov; father of Russian Marxism in *What Is To Be Done?* (1902) had a 'positively instrumental view of the working class'. Further, Plekhanov insisted that workers did not and could not know the full nature of their position and their objectives within society. There was, in his view, a lag of working-class consciousness behind the development of the objective conditions within society. Only the determined activity of the 'revolutionary bacilli' could overcome the lag of consciousness.

He then questioned the basic reality and phenomenological aspect that 'Are the workers always aware of their own interests and of their position among the other classes'? We, the advocates of the materialistic view of history, do not think that this is always so. We do not doubt that the consciousness of people is defined by their social existence. The appearance of new aspects of that existence determines the new content of consciousness. But the determination of consciousness by existence is an entire process, which is accomplished during the course of a more or less prolonged period of time. This is why the workers are for a long time not always aware of their 'real interests'. (Mayer, Robert 1997)

### CONCLUSION:

The study concludes the ground reality that it is the consciousness of the working class that makes them to realize the dearth of the exploited situation and their oppression in the plight of the capitalist mode of society. But on the contrary, it is also true that the struggles and effort drawn by peasant class movements in achieving the sense of liberty encourages the workers' class in the contemporary times to fight for their rights and demands. Trade unions play a vital role in protecting the interests of workers in the factories and industrial sector. To improve working and living conditions and to represent workers' interests in various fora, trade unions appeared as a group expression of the social situation in which workers found themselves and as remedial programmes with particular aims, policies and methods. (Freeman & Medoff, 1984, Hoxie 1921)

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